

"TO THESE, MY LEAST BRETHREN"

EDWARD CASEY, O.P.



MEN I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me."¹ Of all the immortal words that fell from the lips of Our Blessed Lord the above are among those which have been most productive of good. In every century God's saints have listened attentively to them, have meditated with increasing joy on their profound significance, and have fashioned their lives accordingly, literally seeking Christ in His "least brethren." Nor has their search been in vain. They sought and they found; they knocked at the doors of these least brethren and Christ Himself opened unto them.

The army of saints has marched down the ages holding high the banner with its golden inscription, *Charity*. It is a holy militia held together not by national patriotism nor by the martial regulations of governments, but by that strongest of bonds, kinship with the Eternal Galilean, the Commander-in-chief. The strife of battle and the passing of years have taken their toll but always new and Christ-like figures have loomed up "to guard, watch over, protect, and defend"² their least brethren.

Just as the saints saw Christ in His little ones, so, on the other hand, did these poor, and sick, and unfortunate see Christ in His saints. They did not know the joy of touching the hem of His garment, yet they knew other Christs who reflected the love and the beauty of the Divine Master. In the first chapter of the gospel according to Saint Mark we read two verses indicative of Our Saviour's popularity, not with the envious Scribes and Pharisees, but with those whom He later designated as His least brethren. "And all the city was gathered together at the door . . . And they flocked to Him from all sides."³ In like manner those holy men and women who have endeavored to imitate the Son of Mary have unconsciously attracted to themselves the poor, the sick, the blind, the lame of every age. These little ones came seeking, perhaps only nourishment and clothing for their bodies; but they went away refreshed and covered

¹ Matt., xxv, 40.

² Prayer of the "Asperges."

as well with the food and raiment of the soul. Here is precisely where true sanctity discloses itself. Where others see bodies, the saints see souls. Where others see only poor, frail, wornout, or diseased fragments of humanity, the saints see temples of the Holy Trinity, potential tabernacles of the Blessed Eucharist and souls redeemed at the price of Christ's Most Precious Blood.

Since the particular will prove more interesting than the general it seems best to consider individually a few of the saints who have especially manifested this love for the least brethren of Christ. With due respect, then, for the lives and labors of all the saints and for the heroic virtue which merited their canonization or their beatification we shall briefly study several who, according to God's providential design, were enabled to manifest a greater degree of love to Christ's least brethren. All the saints emptied themselves of selfishness and were filled with the selflessness of Jesus Christ. God so willed, however, that some of them should be conspicuous in the field of external works of charity. Our list is by no means exhaustive. It is an arbitrary selection which might well admit of change or addition.

Glorying "only in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ" * Saint Francis, the Little Poor Man of Assisi, radiated the sweetness of humility and the splendor of charity. Having espoused absolute poverty, Francis set out to care for the poor and the needy of Christ. Lepers became the particular object of his attention after he had overcome his aversion for them by kissing the sores of one of their number. The joy of Francis' heart found outlet in his singing praise of God. He preached incessantly, as much by example as by word. He was the richest man in the world for he was in need of nothing. Indeed, having nothing he yet possessed all things. He gained life by losing it, and humbling himself he was exalted by God.

From the abundance of her royal table Saint Elizabeth, daughter of the King of Hungary, daily fed several hundreds of persons. Hungry mouths cannot praise God. So it was that she proceeded to feed these mouths and to join them in praising the Giver of all good things. Deterred neither by the difficult roads nor by the possibility of disease, she often went with her bundles of clothing and food into the country hovels of the poor. Saint Elizabeth was in truth the servant of these little ones, whom she regarded not as her inferiors but as fellow-subjects of Christ the King.

* Mark, I, 33, 45.

* Gal., vi, 14.

Saint Camillus de Lellis realized that in his day the sick outside of hospitals were in far more need of good nursing than those within. He gathered a few men about him and they devoted themselves to ministering especially to the sick poor and the dying. They bound themselves by vow to visit pestilential areas in time of famine and epidemic. Gradually Camillus' charity spread to every phase of human wretchedness no matter where it was to be found. He knew that however low a man may fall he is never hopeless, that he remains, always capable of better things. Saint Camillus founded the Brothers of a Happy Death and was also responsible for the institution of the Society of the Red Cross. Like the Divine Physician, Camillus "went about doing good."⁵ He led the sick from a life of physical pain to one of spiritual beauty; he led the poor from the tenements of the slums to the mansions of heaven.

For forty years Saint Peter Claver found his happiness in caring for the negro slaves who arrived starving, miserable, and half-mad in the port of Cartagena in the Caribbean Sea. These were indeed Christ's least brethren and Peter saw Christ in each of them. He did not argue about the morality of slavery but he devoted his life to elevating the morals of the slaves. Others shrank in horror from the stench and filth below the decks of these slave boats, whereas Peter Claver joyfully rushed in with his baskets of food, clothing and bandages. He soothed the poor negroes and won their hearts; he bathed their bodies, then cleansed their souls.

A simple shepherd become a priest: that was Saint Vincent de Paul. Led on by God he scaled the heights of divine love to become one of the most renowned protectors of Christ's least brethren. Included in the immense embrace of his charity were the poor, the sick, foundlings, convicts, idiots, reprobates, galley-slaves, and all sinners. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society, one of the best known of modern Catholic organizations, claims him as its patron. He founded both the Congregation of the Mission, known as the Vincentian Fathers, and the Sisters of Charity, and so his spiritual sons and daughters will continue until the end of time his superhuman work of caring for the blessed poor, whom "we have with us always."⁶

In 1934, less than one hundred years after his death, Joseph Cottolengo was canonized. His "Little House of Divine Providence" started as a tiny hospital and grew into a miniature city. Today it flourishes, and it has been described by one writer as a University of Catholic Charity. It contains three large and fully equipped hospitals,

⁵ Acts, x, 38.

⁶ John, xii, 8.

homes for the blind, the deaf and the dumb, who are cared for by experienced teachers. It has homes for orphans and foundlings, for abandoned boys and girls, an infirmary for those afflicted with chronic and incurable diseases, homes for cripples, epileptics, and the feeble minded. Saint Joseph accepted primarily those rejected by other agencies and institutions. He said: "All the poor are our patrons; but those who to the material eye are so repulsive and vile are our best patrons; they are our real gems."⁷ Again he said, "Be generous of heart and hand, for who knows but that among the poor who present themselves Jesus Christ may have been present in person already, or may be in the future."⁸

The modern apostle of boys is Saint John Bosco. With a limitless trust in God's help and a full coöperation with divine grace he started with one boy, soon had hundreds, and then thousands. In each of them John Bosco saw the Little Boy of Mary and Joseph. He loved best those who appeared the least lovable. He drew to himself boys of all kinds: orphans, those who had been abandoned, roughnecks, thieves, and some long since acquainted with gross impurity. A few betrayed John Bosco, but the vast majority were conquered by his holiness, manliness, kindness, and tireless activity in their behalf. Even as the number of his boys increased he would not neglect his former duties. He visited the prisons and hospitals, taught Catechism to the orphans, and found time to counsel the countless men and women, rich and poor, who came to him for advice. His main work, however, was with boys. To continue it he founded the Congregation of the Salesians; and so the spiritual sons of Saint John Bosco live on, leading boys heavenward to Mary and her Divine Son.

Throughout the city of Lima, Peru, Blessed Martin de Porres, the humble Dominican laybrother, was known for his works of charity. Slaves and prisoners, the hungry, the thirsty, and the poor were included among the closest friends of Brother Martin. Often he carried the abandoned sick to his own bed in the Priory of the Holy Rosary. From the rich he begged funds with which to build a home for orphans. He wished neglected infants and children to be cared for as he would like to have cared for the Babe of Bethlehem. Blessed Martin was frequently rebuked and contradicted; but he rejoiced in being hated for the sake of Christ, and he persevered until the end in humility and charity. He experienced the truth of the words in the

⁷ Ballario, S., *Il beato Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, (Turin: 1921) p. 74. Quoted in Walsh's, *The Saints and Social Work*. (Baltimore: 1937) p. 98.

⁸ Quoted by Walsh, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Imitation of Christ, "If Thou seekest Jesus in all things thou shalt surely find Jesus."⁹

In their zeal for charity the saints only followed out the desire of Holy Mother Church. They avoided the cold merciless philanthropy which gives mainly "to be seen by men."¹⁰ Knowing that they were in reality giving to Christ they gave their time, their prayers, and, if they had any, their money to His least brethren. Charity is love, and only when works of assistance are imbued with the warm and vivifying love of Jesus Christ do we find anything that touches human hearts and makes for happiness. From her very inception the Catholic Church has practiced the charity of her Divine Founder. Today Catholic charity is organized better than ever before in the history of the Church. Yet this charity has never become mere humanitarianism. In the sick and the poor at home and abroad the Church sees the Poor Man of Nazareth and she makes haste to lend aid to these needy ones. Only in the name of Jesus does she make the appeal for the Foreign Missions, Peter's Pence, the Negro and Indian Missions, and other world-wide or nation-wide charitable collections. Remembering that "where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,"¹¹ the Associated Catholic Charities hold an annual convention with a view to a more just and systematic disposition of the funds at their command. With Christ in their midst they would enhance their natural distribution of alms by adding to it the supernatural charity which "dealeth not perversely . . . and seeketh not her own,"¹² the charity which "covers a multitude of sins."¹³

For us it may not be given to equal the charitable works performed by the saints but let us at least imitate their motives. The poor widow in the gospel cast into the treasury "two mites, which make about a half a cent."¹⁴ Yet our Divine Master said, "Amen I say to you, this poor widow hath cast in more than all they who have cast into the treasury. For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want cast in all she had, even her whole living."¹⁵ To the least brethren of Christ the saints gave cheerfully and without thought of themselves for they knew God would not be outdone in generosity. In like manner let us freely give to God's little ones, for

⁹ Book II, Chap. VII.

¹⁰ Matt., xxiii, 5.

¹¹ Matt., xviii, 20.

¹² I Cor., xiii, 4, 5.

¹³ I Peter, iv, 8.

¹⁴ Mark, xii, 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43, 44.

freely we have received of God. At times we may look in vain for an earthly recompense. In this we might also strive to rise to the stature of the saints who were too big to worry over such passing trifles. They laid up their treasures in heaven, where they knew them to be safe from thief and moth, and where they could share them for eternity with Christ and His brethren.

A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

PHILIP HYLAND, O.P.

When we come to Heaven's Gate
We'll, most likely, hesitate—

Awed and blinded by the glare
From the wond'rous Golden Stair;

Fearful, too, to stand alone
At the massive Judgment Throne—

Then a little Child we'll see,
Hear the words: "Come, follow Me!"

Meekly grasp the proffered hand
Haste to answer the command;

Bow to Peter's smiling nod
And enter—hand in hand with God.